

Gendering Genesis, Engendering Difference

A Catholic Theological Quest

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The word “gender” has changed its meaning in the English-speaking world.¹ Whereas once it was a grammatical term, it is now associated with sexual difference, identity, and otherness, in ways that provoke strong reactions from many religious and cultural conservatives. At the biological level, intersex people are recognized as a significant minority occupying the spectrum between those who are categorized as either male or female in terms of their chromosomes, hormones, and/or sex organs, while transgender personalities present a complex plurality of identities that resist simple categorization as masculine or feminine.

Yet as Thomas Laqueur argues, these contested sexual dualisms and essentialisms are a product of modernity, underwritten by scientific “evidence” that is more susceptible to the influence of culture than many scientists are willing

to acknowledge.² Pre-modern western culture and many non-western cultures even today have a more fluid understanding of gender than post-Enlightenment scientific epistemologies are able to accommodate.

Laqueur pays insufficient attention to theological concepts of gender, but Roman Catholic theology has traditionally been gendered rather than sexed. Sarah Coakley and others argue that concepts of gender had a formative influence on patristic theology, so that gender theory and systematic theology owe an inescapable debt to one another.³ Coakley goes so far as to argue that:

only systematic theology (of a particular sort) can adequately and effectively respond to the rightful critiques that gender studies and political and liberation theology have laid at its door. And *only* gender studies, inversely, and its accompanying political insights, can thus properly re-animate systematic theology for the future.⁴

¹ For more in-depth analysis of the issues referred to in this essay, see Tina Beattie, “The Theological Study of Gender”, 32–52 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (ed. A. Thatcher; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014); Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void – a Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013); Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006); Tina Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women’s Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002).

² Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990).

³ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).

⁴ Sarah Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Sys-

In Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the gendered understanding of the Church as Mother, personified in the Virgin Mary, persisted in various forms from the time of the Pauline epistles until the Second Vatican Council, with an elaborate sacramental poetics of nuptial and parental imagery shaping human and divine relationships. After the Council, much of this gendered sacramentality and ecclesiology was abandoned, only to be reclaimed by Pope John Paul II, who was influenced by theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. This has given rise to a movement known as “theology of the body” (see below), which continues to fuel deep divisions and disagreements among Roman Catholic theologians.

This essay focuses on Roman Catholic approaches to issues of gender in the context of different readings of the early chapters of the Book of Genesis.

Gendering Genesis

Sandra Lipsitz Bem, in her 1993 book, *The Lenses of Gender*, argues that we should look at rather than through the lenses of gender, in order to analyse how our perceptions are shaped by unchallenged assumptions rooted in normative and polarized concepts of sexual difference.⁵ When we follow this advice in reading Genesis, we discover the truth of Joan Scott’s insight that, while we have access to “culturally available symbols that evoke multiple (and often contradictory) representations,” we also find ourselves confronted by “normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meaning of the symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities.”⁶ When we try to read Genesis anew, we might find ourselves struggling against constraints that have insinuated themselves deep

into our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of the text.

Phyllis Trible’s pioneering scholarship exposed the extent to which Christian interpretations of Genesis have been filtered through the lenses of gender in ways that have sustained patriarchal ideologies and sexual hierarchies.⁷ Ziony Zevit is one of several more recent Jewish and Christian scholars who have contributed to this project of gendered textual analysis by bringing their own particular challenges and insights to bear on the ancient Hebrew texts.⁸ Such studies make clear the extent to which Christian interpretations of Genesis continue to lend divine legitimation to a heterosexual social order predicated upon male authority and female subordination. As Scott argues, “the male/female opposition” serves to “vindicate political power” by making references to gendered, hierarchical relationships “seem sure and fixed, outside human construction, part of the natural or divine order. ... To question or alter any aspect threatens the entire system.”⁹

With this in mind, let me turn to “theology of the body” and its appeal to Genesis 2–3 to support a modern, conservative Roman Catholic interpretation of the significance of sexual difference.

In a series of papal audiences between 1979 and 1980, John Paul II sought to reanimate the nuptial and maternal theology of the pre-conciliar Church through a reclamation of the sexual significance of the story of creation and the fall in Genesis 2–3.¹⁰ This “theology of the body” has had a significant influence on official Roman Catholic teachings about sex and gender since the 1980s. It looks to the story of the creation of male and female in Genesis 2 to underwrite an essentialist theology of sexual difference, claiming that the one-flesh union referred to in Genesis 2:24 constitutes the prototype in-

tematic Task”, 52–61 in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 85 (2009), 52 (emphasis in original).

⁵ Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).

⁶ Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, 61–81 in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (eds. R. Parker & P. Aggleton; London: Routledge, 2007), 71.

⁷ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 72–143.

⁸ Ziony Zevit, *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

⁹ Scott, 75.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: “Catechesis on the Book of Genesis”* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1981).

tended by God for relationships between the sexes – i.e. monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

In place of the earlier model of sexual difference as hierarchical, theology of the body posits the idea of complementarity to argue that the sexes are equal but different, and that these differences pervade all aspects of human identity, as created and willed by God. In his 1995 “Letter to Women,” written on the occasion of the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, John Paul II claims that “Womanhood and manhood are complementary *not only from the physical and psychological points of view*, but also from the *ontological*.”¹¹ Such claims represent a shift in Roman Catholic anthropology – from the predominantly one-sex model described by Laqueur, to a two-sex model influenced by popular science and romantic sexual stereotypes.

Mary Anne Case has argued persuasively that sexual complementarity is a twentieth-century theological innovation.¹² Advocates of theology of the body promote it as Roman Catholicism’s solution to the sexual crises of late modernity, but beneath its ostensibly positive representation of married sexual procreative love, it is rooted in resistance to feminism, including women’s reproductive rights, and to homosexual rights, while also seeking to defend the essential masculinity of the sacramental priesthood by appealing to the “feminine genius” and maternal vocation of women.

At the time of writing, Pope Francis is introducing welcome reforms to the Roman Catholic Church, but on the neuralgic issue of gender he has repeated many of the negative judgements of his two predecessors with regard to “gender ideology.” As this paper was delivered at a conference in Lund, let me cite the example of Francis’s response to Swedish journalist Kristina Kappellin, when she asked him about women’s ordination on the flight back to Rome from Lund after his visit in November 2016. Francis repeated in almost identical words a response he had

given to another journalist on a previous occasion:

In Catholic ecclesiology there are two dimensions to consider: the Petrine dimension, from the apostle Peter, and the apostolic college, which is the pastoral activity of the bishops; and the Marian dimension, which is the feminine dimension of the Church, and this I have said more than once. I ask myself: who is most important in theology and in the mystic of the Church: the apostles or Mary on the day of Pentecost? It is Mary! The Church is a woman. She is ‘la Chiesa’ (in Italian), not ‘il Chiesa’ ... and the Church is the spouse of Christ. It is a spousal mystery. And in light of this mystery you will understand the reason for these two dimensions. The Petrine dimension, which is the bishops, and the Marian dimension, which is the maternity of the Church ... but in the most profound sense. A Church does not exist without this feminine dimension, because she herself is feminine.¹³



This informal response is a succinct summary of many of the claims of theology of the body and its corresponding ecclesiology. It makes clear the incoherence of modern Catholic teaching with regard to gender and sexual difference, which results from grafting an essentialist and dualistic model of sexual ontology onto the gender fluidity of traditional ecclesiology. In order to belong to the masculine Petrine dimension of the Church, one has to be biologically male. The priesthood is sexed rather than gendered. However, the feminine Marian dimension is gendered rather than sexed. The body of the Church incorporates multiple sexual bodies at every stage of development in her many members, but the Church herself is not a female body, and many male bodies belong within the imaginary maternal body of the Marian Church. Muddling the

¹¹ John Paul II, “Letter to Women” (1995), at https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html (accessed July 17, 2017), emphasis in original.

¹² Mary Ann Case, “The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Anathematization of Gender”, 155–172 in *Religion & Gender* 6 (2016).

¹³ Holy See Press Office, “The Pope Speaks with Journalists in the Return Flight from Sweden, 02.11.2016”, at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/11/02/161102a.html> (accessed July 17, 2017). See also Gerard O’Connell, “Pope Francis: Some Final Thoughts on the Flight Home”, in *America*, 28 September 2015, <http://papalvisit.americamedia.org/2015/09/28/pope-francis-some-final-thoughts-on-the-flight-home/> (accessed July 17, 2017).

grammatical gendering of nouns with sexual identity, Pope Francis assures us that the Church is a woman, because the Church is a feminine noun in Italian. In Polish – the native language of John Paul II – the noun for Church (*kościół*) is masculine! As I have argued extensively elsewhere, this model of theological anthropology renders the female body redundant, apart from its biological function of reproduction, because every body is a woman in the Church, but only male bodies are priests. The male is essential, the female is inessential.

Like John Paul II, Francis has given a series of general audiences on the Book of Genesis. Referring to the creation of male and female in Genesis 1:27, he observes that:

Modern contemporary culture has opened new spaces, new forms of freedom and new depths in order to enrich the understanding of this difference. But it has also introduced many doubts and much skepticism. For example, I ask myself, if the so-called gender theory is not, at the same time, an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it. ...

The communion with God is reflected in the communion of the human couple and the loss of trust in the heavenly Father generates division and conflict between man and woman.

Francis goes on to speak about “the great responsibility” of enabling people:

to rediscover the beauty of the creative design that also inscribes the image of God in the alliance between man and woman. The earth is filled with harmony and trust when the alliance between man and woman is lived properly.¹⁴

This is an excellent illustration of what Scott means about the power of divinely legitimated gender roles to underwrite gendered hierarchies written into the order of creation.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, “General Audience, Wednesday, 15 April, 2015”, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150415_udienza-generale.html (accessed July 17, 2017).

If we turn from modern papal readings of Genesis to the work of scriptural exegetes, we are confronted by similar problems. Explaining the narrative structure of Genesis 2, Gerhard von Rad writes that “This narrative is concerned with man, his creation, and the care God devoted to him.” We might take this as an inclusive usage of the word “man,” but von Rad continues a few sentences further on:

It is man’s world, the world of his life (the sown, the garden, the animals, the woman), which God in what follows establishes *around man*; and this forms the primary theme of the entire narrative, *’ādām ’ādāma* (man–earth).¹⁵

As Tribble observes:

According to traditional interpretations, the narrative in Genesis 2:7–3:24 ... is about “Adam and Eve.” It proclaims male superiority and female inferiority as the will of God. It portrays woman as “temptress” and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband. Over the centuries this misogynous reading has acquired a status of canonicity so that those who deplore and those who applaud the story both agree upon its meaning.¹⁶

Christian biblical scholarship is heavily influenced by looking through lenses of gender that see the male as normative, authoritative, and primary, and the female as other, subordinate, and derivative. To deconstruct these interpretations in order to explore the possibility of reading scripture differently is to recognize with Leonard Cohen in his famous song, “Anthem,” that:

There is a crack, a crack in everything,
That’s how the light gets in.

To approach Genesis as a revelatory myth full of cracks is to allow new light to shine through this contested and turbulent text. My reading of Genesis is not a claim to mastery but an opening up of a space of mystery wherein gendered bodies

¹⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, revised ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 76.

¹⁶ Tribble, 72–73.

play out their differences differently in the garden of their literary creation.

Reading through a Glass Darkly

The Book of Genesis is a palimpsest upon which many have inscribed their stories, and scholars still disagree as to the authorship, structure, and context of what today constitutes the Pentateuch, including the Book of Genesis. Zevit shows how any quest for the original or authentic meaning of Genesis becomes mired in proliferating questions to do with language, history, and interpretation. His own study demolishes – with great irenicism and wit – the doctrines of original sin, sexual complementarity, and virginal Edenic innocence that have been imposed upon Genesis by two millennia of Christian interpreters.

Yet we can no more go back to the earliest meanings of the Genesis story than we can to the beginning of the creation that it describes. Here, Jacques Derrida's insight seems particularly relevant, when he cautions that:

We must begin *wherever we are*, and the thought of the trace, which cannot take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.¹⁷

My reading of Genesis begins from within a nexus of subjective perspectives. I read as a Roman Catholic with a sense of accountability to my own faith community and its traditions, but also as an academic theologian and gender theorist with a responsibility to engage with the challenges that contemporary culture poses to such traditions, not in order to capitulate to culture's demands but in the belief that living traditions have a dynamic capacity to respond to and grow through social change and scientific discovery. I read as a Christian deeply aware of the extent to which Christian interpreters have appropriated Hebrew texts, in ways that have left our shared history scarred by persecutions, deportations, and ultimately genocide perpetrated by Chris-

tians against Jews. I read as a woman who shares with most women through history the deformation of the self that results from attempting to fit into the Procrustean bed of narrow and restrictive gender roles defined by traditions dominated by male elites. Acknowledging these tensions *are* part of the messy process of reading in a way that seeks meaning but eschews truth, if by truth we mean the imposition of a fixed and final meaning on a text.

So in what follows I play with the Genesis text, toying with it to send it skittering in new directions and chasing it to see where it might lead and what might be discovered in its secret hiding places. To quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her translator's preface to *Of Grammatology*, this is intended to be "A reading that *produces* rather than *protects*."¹⁸ In Derridean terms, I do not seek the trace of a God who was the source of the original meaning of the text. Rather, I seek to follow the elusive scent of God through the maze of meanings that presents itself in the language of Genesis, believing that the God of our beginnings is also the God of our continuities, our disruptions and our endings, who is always a little before and beyond wherever we happen to find ourselves, "in a text where we already believe ourselves to be."

Back to the Future with Genesis

Genesis has two different accounts of the creation of humankind. Genesis 1 describes the simultaneous creation of male and female in the image of God. (I am using the King James version for reasons of personal preference, because I like its poetry):

And God (*'elōhîym*) said, Let us make man (*'ādām*) in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2016), 177.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface", xxvii–cxi in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2016), xcvi.

So God created man (*hā- 'ādām*) in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male (*zākār*) and female (*neqēbā*) created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:26–28)

The word *'elōhīym* can be singular or plural, and it can refer to a goddess or goddesses as well as to God, gods, angels, or judges, depending on the context. So, for example, Ashtoreth the goddess is *'elōhīym* in the Book of Kings (1 Kings 11:5). von Rad suggests that this constitutes an act of concealment by God, who “includes himself among the heavenly beings and thereby conceals himself in this multiplicity.”¹⁹ Christian interpreters through the ages have interpreted the use of the plural (“Let us make man”) as a reference to the Trinity, a point to which I shall return.

The noun translated as man – *'ādām* or *hā- 'ādām* – is uniquely used in relation to the human, referring both to the individual, particularly when written as *'ādām* without the definite article (*hā- 'ādām*), and sometimes collectively to humankind. There is ongoing debate as to how far the term *'ādām* without the article shifts the focus from the generic human to the male (often translated as the proper name Adam), but in Genesis 1:26 it clearly denotes the species rather than the individual male.²⁰ In both senses, the word refers to the breathing, animated creature made in the image of God, created out of a clod of soil, whose name evokes associations with blood (*dām*) and soil (*'ādāmāh*).

The words for male and female in Genesis 1:27 – *zākār* and *neqēbā* – are what today we would call sexed rather than gendered, referring to the biological male and female of any species of domesticated animal. Marc Brettler suggests

that the etymology of *zākār* could be associated with possession of a penis, though he questions whether this association would have been apparent in common Hebrew usage. More interesting from my own perspective is the association of *zākār* with the word for remembering, making a memorial, or even swearing an oath. Brettler suggests that *neqēbā* is “unusually transparent etymologically, deriving from the root *nqb*, ‘to pierce’ – it is a biological term similar to the cuneiform *munus* sign of the female public triangle.”²¹ Again, I note that possible meaning here, and I shall return to both these words later.

There is a similar version of this account of the creation of humankind in Genesis 5, where again *'ādām* is used inclusively:

In the day that God created man (*'ādām*), in the likeness of God made he him. Male (*zākār*) and female (*neqēbā*) created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam (*'ādām*), in the day when they were created. (Genesis 5:1–2)

The reference to the human being created in the image of God in Genesis 1:26–27 has had a profound influence on Christian anthropology, but Genesis 2 and 3 have been more influential in shaping the Christian understanding of sexual difference, with remarkably little variation until the rise of feminist scholarship in the twentieth century.

The account of the creation of the human in Genesis 2 reads as follows:

And the LORD God (*YHWH 'elōhīym*) formed man (*hā- 'ādām*) of the dust of the ground (*hā- 'ādāmā*), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man (*hā- 'ādām*) became a living soul (*nepeš hayyāh*). And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man (*hā- 'ādām*) whom he had formed. (Genesis 2:7–8)

And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man (*hā- 'ādām*) should be alone; I will make him an help meet (*'ēzer kenegdōw*) for him (*neged*). (Genesis 2:18)

¹⁹ von Rad, 58.

²⁰ For more discussion on these questions of translation, cf. Michael S. Heiser, “Is ‘adam ‘Adam’?”, in *Naked Bible Blog*, 20 June 2012, <http://drmsb.com/adam-adam/> (accessed July 17, 2017); Ernest Lussier, “Adam in Genesis 1:1–4:24”, 137–139 in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 18 (1956).

²¹ Marc Brettler, “Happy Is the Man who Fills His Quiver with Them” (Psalm 127:5): Constructions of Masculinities in the Psalms” 198–220 in *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity* (ed. I. Zsolnay; London: Routledge, 2017), 199.

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam (*hā-ʾādām*), and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man (*hā-ʾādām*), made he a woman (*ʾiššā*), and brought her unto the man (*hā-ʾādām*). And Adam (*hā-ʾādām*) said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman (*ʾiššā*), because she was taken out of Man (*ʾiš*). Therefore shall a man (*ʾiš*) leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife (*ʾiššā*): and they shall be one flesh." And they were both naked, the man (*hā-ʾādām*) and his wife (*ʾiššā*), and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:21–25)

In Genesis 2, the human creature is *hā-ʾādām* until the creation of the woman, when the terms woman (*ʾiššā*) and man (*ʾiš*) appear. Tribble suggests that *hā-ʾādām* refers to the male creature in Genesis 2:25, though she emphasises the continuing ambiguity of the term:

The story itself builds ambiguity into the word *hā-ʾādām*, an ambiguity that should prevent interpreters from limiting it to one specific and unequivocal meaning throughout. Furthermore, the ambiguity in the word matches the ambiguity in the creature itself – the ambiguity of one flesh becoming two creatures.²²

Brettler suggests that the words *ʾiššā* and *ʾiš*, commonly found as a pair in the Hebrew Bible, are less definitive than the two sexes identified as *zākār* and *neqēbā* in Genesis 1:27. He proposes that "together they were all-inclusive, and formed a minimal pair," with *ʾiš* in particular referring to a range of different kinship groups and communal relationships so that it can be interpreted as "not a biological, but a social category."²³ Tribble places the emphasis on the simultaneous creation of male and female (*ʾiš* and *ʾiššā*), with the words "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" indicating "unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality."²⁴ Tribble also makes the point that, when the man calls the woman *ʾiššā*, the Hebrew refers to an act of recognition rather than naming, since the formula for naming would be to call by name, implying authority (for example, in

the earth creature's naming of the animals). Only after the expulsion from Eden does the man call the woman by name. The word *ʾiššā* "designates gender; it does not specify person."²⁵

The term *ʿēzer kenegdōw*, translated most commonly as "helper" or "help" ("help meet" in the KJV), or occasionally as "companion," has traditionally been interpreted as signifying the subordination of the woman to the man. However, again the Hebrew meaning varies according to the context, with the word *ʿēzer* occurring most frequently to signify God's relationship to Israel. Used in conjunction with *kenegdōw*, the word signifies "identity, mutuality, and equality," according to Tribble. It is a companion who "is neither subordinate nor superior; one who alleviates isolation through identity."²⁶ Zevit focuses on the term *neged*, translated as "for him." According to Zevit, the word in this context "indicates kin related horizontally"²⁷ in a way that does not imply a positional relationship because at this point in the narrative there are no other kinship relationships.²⁸

Writing before the emergence of gender theory, Tribble interprets the Hebrew from an exclusively heterosexual perspective with two and only two sexes, albeit sharing a common human fleshiness in *ʾādām*. More recent scholars such as Brettler and Zevit, attentive to questions of gender, suggest more nuanced gendered perspectives with regard to the various functions of the Hebrew nouns for male and female, man and woman, husband and wife. The words *ʾiššā* and *ʾiš* suggest gendered rather than sexual difference, and both can be used in more loosely defined kinship contexts than that of gender alone.

Leaving out the account of the temptation and its consequences (whether we refer to this as "the fall," or some other act of alienation and expulsion or even maturation), I want to refer briefly to the significance of the names used in Genesis 3:20 and 22–24:

²⁵ Tribble, 100.

²⁶ Tribble, 90.

²⁷ Zevit, 136.

²⁸ Zevit offers an intriguing argument as to why the creation of the woman from the earth creature's body should be understood as a creation from his penis rather than his rib. It is beyond the scope of this essay to engage with this suggestion.

²² Tribble, 98.

²³ Brettler, 200.

²⁴ Tribble, 99.

And Adam (*'ādām*) called his wife's name Eve (*chavvâh*); because she was the mother of all living. (Genesis 3:20)

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man (*'ādām*) is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man (*'ādām*); and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22–24)

The Hebrew proper noun *chavvâh* means life. It occurs only once more in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Genesis 4:1:

And Adam (*hā-'ādām*) knew (*yada*) Eve his wife (*chavvâh 'iššâ*); and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man (*'îš*) from the Lord. (Genesis 4:1)

If we try to find clues as to the gendering of the humans in Genesis 3:20 and 4:1, we find a reversion to the singular *'ādām* (possibly male?) in relation to a feminine name signifying life. Here, the naming formula that the earth creature had previously used for the animals is also used for the woman. According to Tribble's interpretation:

Now, in effect, the man reduces the woman to the status of an animal by calling her a name. ... Ironically, he names her *Eve*, a Hebrew word that resembles in sound the word *life*, even as he robs her of life in its created fullness.²⁹

Zevit suggests that the theme of kinship, introduced in the description of the woman as *'ēzer kenegdōw*, is continued in the name *hawwâh*; he proposes a translation that reads: "And he called her Hawwa, that is, Kin-maker, because she was the mother of all kinfolk."³⁰

The foregoing would benefit from more extensive analysis, but it serves to demonstrate that, with regard to the representation of sexual difference and gender in Genesis, there can of

course be wrong readings, but there can be no single correct reading. Indeed, it is hard to see how the revelation of the divine mystery whose image is imparted to the human creature could be other than obscure and multi-faceted as it shines obliquely through the cracks in an ancient text whose original authors and readers are all but lost to us.

The story of Genesis 1–3 forms part of the overarching unity of the Pentateuch, and only came to prominence in its own right when the early Church began to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures as typologies and prophecies of Christ and the Church. The earliest developed theology of this is to be found in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, which reads the incarnation as a recapitulation of history, beginning with Genesis:

For as by one man's disobedience sin entered, and death obtained [a place] through sin; so also by the obedience of one man, righteousness having been introduced, shall cause life to fructify in those persons who in times past were dead. [Rom. 5.19] And as the protoplast himself Adam, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil ("for God had not yet sent rain, and man had not tilled the ground" [Gen. 2.5]), and was formed by the hand of God, that is, by the Word of God, for "all things were made by Him", [Jn 1.3] and the Lord took dust from the earth and formed man; so did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam [into Himself], from Mary, who was as yet a virgin.³¹

However, even before these early theological appropriations, the Pauline letters were already appealing to Genesis to justify the gendered hierarchies that were beginning to form in Christian worshipping communities:

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for

²⁹ Tribble, 133.

³⁰ Zevit, 229.

³¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 309–567 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (ed. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 454 (3.21.10).

woman, but woman for man. (1 Corinthians 11:7–9).

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (1 Timothy 2:11)

Yet Paul's Letter to the Galatians includes a baptismal formula that suggests a very different way of understanding sexual difference in the early Church:

~~For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.~~ (Galatians 3:27–28)

The New Testament has a less complex history than the Hebrew Bible, but it can also sustain multiple readings and interpretations. Galatians invites reflection on the possibilities that emerge when gendered human bodies are organically united beyond gender into the body of Christ through baptismal rebirth.

In what follows I suggest possible avenues for further research, believing that they could lead to new theological insights into the significance of gender and its undoing in the community of the baptized. First, I offer a brief exploration of gendered possibilities that emerge if the reference in Genesis 1 to the human made in the image of God is read from the perspective of Trinitarian theology, and second I ask what significance sexual embodiment and symbolism might have for Roman Catholic incarnational theology and sacramentality. I now shift from engaging with the Hebrew text ("reading out") to projecting back into that text subsequent Christian interpretations ("reading in"). I repeat that these Christian readings are partial and modest, insofar as they seek to remain within a problematic tradition, but in such a way that they do not claim to be more authoritative or closer to "the truth" than readings from within other traditions – particularly Judaism.

Gendering the Trinity

The creation of humankind in the image of God in Genesis 1:26–27 has been a foundational principle for Christian anthropology, and in the twentieth century it has become a cornerstone of Roman Catholic teaching on human dignity and rights. The question of what it means to be created in the image of the Trinity has been addressed in various ways. Thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas located the threefold structure of the Trinity within the individual mind with its capacities for memory, understanding and will. More recently, and particularly under the influence of von Balthasar and theology of the body, the Roman Catholic Church has come close to identifying the Trinity with the procreative sexual couple. This projects into the Godhead a highly romanticized notion of the modern nuclear family with its fertile couplings of feminine wife, masculine husband, and naturally conceived children.

To approach questions of Trinitarian anthropology in the context of recent theories of gender, informed by studies of Genesis, is to open up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation. If Christian interpreters allow the *imago Dei* to become the *imago Trinitatis*, a deep ambiguity begins to unsettle the idea of the rational masculine individual made in the image of the philosophical One which has threaded its way through the Christian theological tradition, even as it has undergone deconstructive and subversive appropriations in the mystical margins. Modern gender theory calls into question this androcentric anthropology to allow intimations of divine and human otherness to disrupt the meanings attributed to the gendered and sexual self. Coakley refers to "gender's mysterious and plastic openness to divine transfiguration" so that:

the "fixed" fallen differences of worldly gender are transfigured precisely by the interruptive activity of the Holy Spirit, drawing gender into Trinitarian purgation and transformation. *Twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by Threeness.*³²

³² Coakley, "Is there a Future", 60 (emphasis in original).

Theologians today are beginning to recognize that medieval women mystics were vernacular theologians, unschooled in the dialectics of Latin scholasticism, but using different linguistic forms to express doctrines and theological ideas that were as orthodox as those of their scholastic counterparts.³³ To give only one example, let me focus on Catherine of Siena's Trinitarian theology in her famous *Dialogue*.

The dialectical style of scholasticism is broken open by Catherine's dramatically expressive rhetoric, which constitutes the creative characterization of a dialogue in which the narrator, the soul, and God are caught up in fluid and passionate expressions of love and desire, knowing and unknowing, union and separation. The narrator Catherine is repeatedly displaced and indeed excluded ("ambushed," perhaps) by a dialogue between the soul and God which she herself cannot understand, and of course behind the scenes there is the author who is choreographing this perichoretic literary performance. It is a theological style that mimetically evokes the Trinitarian dynamics of which it speaks.

Catherine's claims that "I am she who is not,"³⁴ and that Christ "makes of her another himself,"³⁵ are vulnerable to feminist criticism if the gendered aspect of such claims is exaggerated. However, it is anachronistic to read these through the lens of gender politics. Catherine was a woman of her time and subject to the constraints and frustrations which that entailed, but the polyphonic style of the *Dialogue* resists any gender stereotyping. Christ is mother as well as lover, the wound in his side opening to accommodate the body of the other in a metaphor that is more uterine than phallic in its imagery.

There are two main points I want to make about Catherine's theology. First, it is Trinitarian through and through, so that she never forgets that the God she addresses is the God incarnate in Christ and communicated to humankind through the incessant activity of the Holy Spirit. Here is how Catherine expresses her yearning for

the Trinity, in a paradoxical juxtaposition of fulfilment and desire, satisfaction and hunger:

You, eternal Trinity, are a deep sea: The more I enter you, the more I discover, and the more I discover, the more I seek you. You are insatiable, you in whose depth the soul is sated yet remains always hungry for you, thirsty for you, eternal Trinity, longing to see you with the light in your light. ... You, eternal Trinity, are the craftsman; and I your handiwork have come to know that you are in love with the beauty of what you have made, since you made of me a new creation in the blood of your Son.³⁶

The second point is that Catherine's mysticism (if we want to call it that) is never an escape from the primary responsibility of the Christian to her neighbour in need. Again and again, Catherine reminds her audience that Christian love is expressed not in the intensity of prayer but in love of neighbour. God tells her that "love of me and love of neighbour are one and the same thing: Since love of neighbour has its source in me, the more the soul loves me, the more she loves her neighbours."³⁷ There is, then, in Catherine's *Dialogue*, an ecstatic loss of self in rapturous union with the divine, but this never takes precedence over her primary responsibility to the realities of suffering bodily life.

This is the kind of ethical ecstasy that Judith Butler refers to in her book *Undoing Gender*, where she raises "the question of the human, of who counts as the human, and the related question of whose lives count as lives."³⁸ Butler asks these questions in the context of mourning, grief, and passion. She describes these as bringing about the undoing of the self by the Other, as different "*modes of being dispossessed*, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another"³⁹ in a way that eludes definition as either autonomy or relationality. She describes what this means:

³³ Cf. Eliana Corbari, *Vernacular Theology: Dominican Sermons and Audience in Late Medieval Italy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

³⁴ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press), 273.

³⁵ Catherine of Siena, 25.

³⁶ Catherine of Siena, 364–365.

³⁷ Catherine of Siena, 86.

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 17.

³⁹ Butler, 19.

Grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very “I” who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling. The very “I” is called into question by its relation to the one to whom I address myself. This relation to the Other does not precisely ruin my story or reduce me to speechlessness, but it does, invariably, clutter my speech with signs of its undoing.⁴⁰

This could be a description of all contemplative prayer and of the kind of theological language that I am suggesting can respond to the challenges posed around issues of gender. More specifically it could be applied to the kind of Trinitarian theology that Catherine of Siena articulates, in her crafting of a dialogue with God that is a constantly shifting and visceral exchange of desire and otherness, joy and grief, rapture and mourning.

To return to the Genesis text, can the account of the creation of humankind in the image of God sustain such a polyphonic approach in a way that would undo the determinative power of gender as the definitive marker of human difference and otherness? How far can such theological language go, before it becomes detached from its already tenuous links to the Hebrew text?

Well, I think the response must be that the Genesis text is already indeterminate in its interplay of gender and sexual difference. The earth creature is a singular named being (*’ādām*) which is implicitly male but includes the female, and it is also referred to with a generic noun for the human species (*hā-’ādām*). It is a sexed animal (*zākār* and *neqēbā*), and it is incorporated into gendered relationships of kinship and belonging (*’iš* and *’iššā*). The formation of these kinship groups is made possible by the life-giving capacity of the earth creature’s counterpart and companion (*hawwāh*). Elusively imaged in these strange couplings is *’elōhīm*, the divine

otherness concealed in plurality, a “we” which is, in Christian theology, a unity of three. This three disrupts the enclosed duality of the two, continuously interrupting the sexual romance by opening it up to the fecundity of life which is creative as well as procreative, generating difference and diversity in its encounters and couplings.

To be made in the image of the tripersonal God is to be essentially triadic and interpersonal, and therefore it is to be an inessential self – a self that lacks reference to a fixed point of being. In the baptismal formula from Galatians 3 quoted above, it is to move beyond divisive social and sexual hierarchies, in order to become part of a new organic community, sacramentally united with one another in the body of Christ beyond the divisions and distinctions of gender.

This entails a baptismal process of death and rebirth. Baptism is an incorporation into the sacramental body of the Church – a maternal body that is also Christ’s body ~~and the body of his mother Mary~~. It is a reversal of the Freudian family drama with its murderous oedipal desires, and a reconciliation with the Father through the access that Christ offers to the forbidden body of the mother.

In the final part of this paper, I stage an imaginative encounter between my reading of the Book of Genesis and the crucifixion as it is depicted in some examples of medieval art and devotion. This is the most speculative and rudimentary part of my paper – a preliminary airing of a hypothesis that needs more in-depth research. Implicit in what follows is my theological engagement with psychoanalytic theory – particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis – which situates the absent maternal body as the lack around which language circulates, continuously seeking and failing to make present the forbidden and inaccessible object of desire.

The Polymorphous Body of the Crucified Christ

There is a strange era in the art of the crucifixion between the twelfth and ~~fourteenth~~ centuries, in which Christ’s torso appears in the form of a phallus. Leo Steinberg has written about the ex-

⁴⁰ Butler, 19.

posed or thinly veiled genitals of Christ in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, a phenomenon that he attributes in part to the rise of the Franciscan order in the thirteenth century with its injunction “naked to follow the naked Christ.” Steinberg suggests that “Nakedness becomes the badge of the human condition which the Incarnation espoused.”⁴¹

While many of the images to which Steinberg refers are realistic in their representation of Christ’s body, I am referring to an effect which comes about through the exaggeration of Christ’s abdominal muscles and ribcage on the cross. ~~While the~~ visible ribcage can be a way of expressing Christ’s suffering, in these images the phallic symbolism is clearly visible. If we look more closely, we see that in some such images, the wound in Christ’s side is spurting the body fluids of blood and water in the direction of his mother at the foot of the cross. The fluids that flow from Christ’s wound are birth fluids – water and blood flow from bodies in childbirth, not in death. These are baptismal fluids – the fluids of rebirth into eternal life. “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells Nicodemus (John 3:3).

The wound in Christ’s side was commonly described in terms of the birthing maternal body in patristic and medieval theology, with Christ giving birth to the Church in the same way that Eve was “birthed” from the side of Adam.⁴² Together, I would suggest that the bleeding wound and the phallic torso in images such as these symbolize impregnation and birth. On the cross, Christ impregnates his own body through the vaginal wound in his side, in order to give birth to the maternal Church in whose sacraments his

body will henceforth become food for the life of the world.

To return to Genesis, does the light of scriptural revelation help to illuminate the significance of these images? To ask this is not to say that the medieval artists were aware of the interpretative possibilities of the Hebrew text, but they were painting in an era when the identification of Christ as the New Adam and Mary as the New Eve and personification of the Church were commonplace. Genesis 1–3 is the radix, the tap root, the radical underpinning of all Roman Catholic theology, and the maternal Church personified in Mary is the fertile matrix within which it has been interpreted and reinterpreted from generation to generation.

So benefitting from recent Hebrew scholarship, one can suggest that Christ on the cross is *zākār*, bearing in mind that the word has phallic associations, but that it also refers to the duty to remember, particularly in the context of male offspring remembering their fathers. Christ is the Son whose inseminating phallus engenders new kinship groups and passes on to them the duty to remember the Father in whose name he lives and dies.

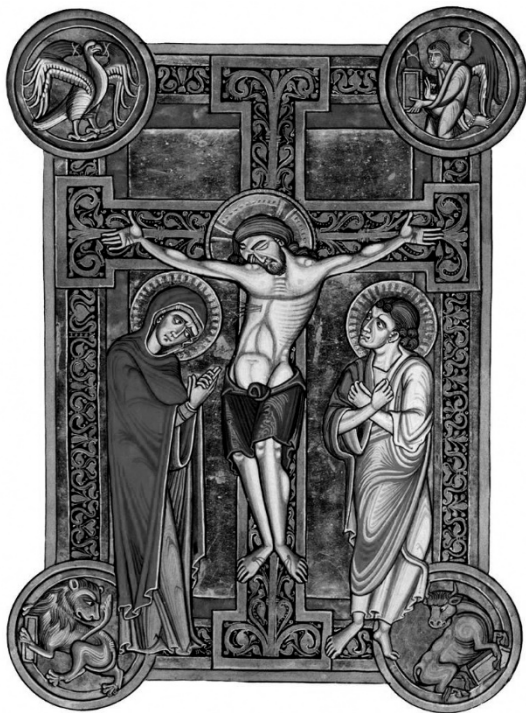
But on the cross, Christ is also forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46), and I have argued elsewhere – in agreement with René Girard – that this can be read as a rejection of the oedipal father gods which have held humankind captive as much in Christianity as in any other religion.⁴³ The body of Christ on the cross morphs from the phallic body of the male into the pierced and feminized body (*neqēbā*) of the one who gives life (*chavvāh*). This is the beginning of a new kinship group, related not through biological blood lines but through sacramental incorporation into the transgendered body of the crucified and risen Christ – the baptismal community referred to in Galatians 3.

Mary at the foot of the cross experiences the piercing of her own soul (*neqēbā*), as prophesied by Simeon (Luke 2:35), but her presence also affirms that the female body is fully incorporated into the new kinship group in Christ, i.e. the Church. Here, we would have to go back before the tenth century, before the conflation of the

⁴¹ Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33.

⁴² Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). For a summary of scholarly hypotheses and debates on this topic, see Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 2013), 119–125.

⁴³ Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate*, 133–135.



Above: Guido da Siena, *Crucifixion*
(c. 1275–1280)

Left: Unknown miniaturist, *Weingarten Sacramentary* (c. 1216)



Above: Jean le Noir, *Christ's Side Wound*, *Psalter of Bonne de Luxembourg* (c. 1349)

Below: Willem Frelant, *An Angel Holding a Cloth with Christ's Bleeding Wound* (early 1460s)



Church with Mary as the “New Eve,” to a patristic era when the two were subtly differentiated. Mary as the New Eve was the particular mother of Christ, and the Church as the New Eve was the mother of the kinship group formed by baptismal rebirth.⁴⁴ This is important because it resists the dissolution of the female body into the imaginary body of the Church. I have already referred to Francis’s description of the Church as “woman,” in a way which deprives the sexual female body of its sacramental significance. The significance of the phallus is retained in the blood sacrifice of the priesthood, but the bleeding vagina and the lactating breasts that symbolize gestation, birth, and nurture are elided.

von Balthasar claims that the Mother at the foot of the cross:

must increasingly renounce everything vitally personal to her for the sake of the Church, in the end to be left like a plundered tree with nothing but her naked faith ... Progressively, every shade of personal intimacy is taken from her, to be increasingly applied to the good of the Church and of Christians.⁴⁵

This has indeed been the lot of the female body in Roman Catholic sacramental theology. It is a source to be plundered for the concepts needed to speak of the Church as mother, but this maternal body is a sexless entity, ruled by the men who are brides and bridegrooms, lovers and mothers, men and women, while the female body languishes in the silence of the biological animal which births but does not speak.

Mary’s virginal body at the foot of the cross tells us that she is not annihilated when Christ births the Church. The female body persists, not as the opposite of the male body, but as part of the goodness of God’s creation within which every body has a space of belonging.

Conclusion

To speak of the transgendered, polymorphous body of Christ in the Church is not to advocate a postmodern parody of embodiment in which the finite body with all its markers of sexuality and difference, limitation and fragility, is eliminated by the symbolic and the performative. It is to affirm the sacramental mystery wherein bodies are birthed anew in a unity that is neither one nor two, in a maternal body that is neither one nor two, in a Trinitarian undoing of the self through ecstatic union with God and fleshy communion with the desiring, suffering other.

Christian personhood is situated in the space of encounter between the infinity of love and the finitude of the law, a space which constitutes what philosopher Gillian Rose describes as the “broken middle.”⁴⁶ The middle ground is a space of ambiguity, tension and paradox. Our experience resonates with that of our mythical primal parents, who find themselves exiled and alienated from God and from one another in a wilderness of pain and death. But through the transgressive potency of prayer, we find ourselves at play with God and with one another, as sisters, brothers, lovers, husbands, wives, daughters, sons, and friends of God.

Whatever different interpretations we might bring to the Hebrew scriptures from within our different traditions, we should bear in mind Phyllis Bird’s summary of the overarching message of the Hebrew Bible: “The heart seeks refuge and rest in God – and finding it, rejoices. Humans are created for praise of their creator. That is their primary vocation.”⁴⁷ For those shaped by the Roman Catholic tradition, in this space of finite fleshy life where hope and desolation together form the shadow dance of the Christian soul, the wounded orphan of the Freudian psyche calls out to the Mother of God in prayer and not in despair, in a language of *jouissance* laden with insatiable longings for wholeness and peace, as

⁴⁴ Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate*, 150–152.

⁴⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. 1: Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 341.

⁴⁶ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

⁴⁷ Phyllis A. Bird, “Theological Anthropology in the Hebrew Bible”, 258–275 in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible* (ed. L. Perdue; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 273.

we perform the Trinitarian relationships we hope
to become:

Hail, our queen, mother of mercy, our life, our
sweetness and our hope.
We cry to you, exiles as we are,
children of Eve;
we sigh to you, groaning and weeping
in this valley of tears.
Ah then, our intercessor, turn your eyes – your
merciful eyes – upon us.
And after this exile is over
show to us Jesus, blessed fruit of your womb.
O merciful, O holy, O sweet virgin Mary.

Summary

This article discusses how gender theory might contribute to new Roman Catholic readings of Genesis 1–3 in terms of Trinitarian anthropology, gender, and sexual and maternal embodiment. Emphasizing that her Roman Catholic perspective is intended to sit alongside rather than displace Jewish interpretations, Beattie argues that papal teachings about gender and sexual difference are based on flawed interpretations of Genesis. Reading through “the lenses of gender,” in engagement with gendered studies of the Hebrew text (primarily by Phyllis Trible, Ziony Zevit and Marc Brettler), she explores the diversity of Hebrew terms used to describe the primordial human creatures and the semantic fluidity of these terms. She describes this task as “reading out” of scripture. She then moves to a process of “reading in,” first by way of an anthropology that unsettles the stable identity of the gendered individual through the interpersonal dynamics of the Trinity. Engaging with the *Dialogue* of Catherine of Siena and the writings of Sarah Coakley and Judith Butler, she argues that a Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 1:26 can open up new perspectives in the Roman Catholic understanding of gender, identity, and otherness. She then turns to medieval art in which the crucified body of Christ is represented with both phallic and vulvic imagery, suggesting insemination, conception, and birth. This invites a new appreciation of the significance of the baptismal community described in Galatians 3, as a kinship group incorporated into the transgendered body of Christ in the maternal Church.